From the Commissioner

Commissioner Dwight O. Helmick

*T**raffic safety in California hit a new high and a new low during 1998, and there is cause for rejoicing over each event.*

The high was in the percentage of Californians buckling their safety belts - 90 percent. That's a record for California and the nation.

Our safety belt success is no accident. For over a decade, the CHP and a strong coalition of local law enforcement and traffic safety agencies have collaborated to promote legislation, enforcement and public awareness.

We've had a massive shift in public perception from years ago, when even law enforcement officers left their safety belts dangling, to our present hyper-awareness that safety belts save the lives of our families, friends and co-workers.

The new low I mentioned earlier is in this area of persons killed. The mileage death rate, which is the number of people killed per 100 million miles of vehicle travel, hit an historic low of 1.19, down 7.8 percent from 1.29.

To give you a little perspective, the CHP began keeping the mileage death rate figures in 1942. That year, the rate was nearly 10 times higher than 1998.

What has made the difference? First, we rely on concerted enforcement by our officers throughout California. We also work hard on prevention with our campaigns against drinking and driving, our Sober Graduation programs in the high schools, our constant drumbeat of safety messages and, of course, safety belts.

Those successes aren't the result of gimmicks or quick fixes. They are the result of the CHP's commitment to traffic safety over the long term.

We've been willing to educate and enforce traffic safety with a new generation of drivers, with a wave of new Americans and with new parents that were children themselves when the secondary safety belt law passed. We know it takes years, sometimes decades, to change behavior.

But when 212 fewer Californians die in traffic collisions than the last year, that's a high, no matter how you look at it.

D. O. HELMICK, *Commissioner*